



TROUT LINE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE MONTANA COUNCIL OF TROUT UNLIMITED

**FYE 2026 ANNUAL
REPORT INSIDE!**

The Blackfoot River and Wisherd
Ridge near Johnsrud Park.

SPRING 2026



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PLUS...CHAPTER REPORTS,
SPRING EVENTS AND MORE!

MONTANA TU'S MISSION

is to conserve, protect and restore Montana's world-class coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

Founded in 1964, Montana Trout Unlimited is a statewide grassroots organization comprised of 13 chapters and approximately 4,000 TU members.

www.montanatu.org

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Every spring, as runoff clears and the first hatches begin to stir, I find myself reflecting on what it means to be part of this organization — and this year, that reflection feels especially meaningful. Spring also ushers in a new fiscal year for MTU, so this edition of the newsletter includes the organization's Annual Report, which is also a way to reflect on accomplishments of the last 12 months. I am proud to share with you the significant growth in funds raised and put to work through coldwater restoration, trout-friendly policy and public engagement, summarized in this year's Annual Report (FYE2026).

Those accomplishments are also readily apparent in the articles featured in this spring newsletter, from project manager Katie Young's work to manage beavers and build flood resilience in a healthy trout stream to MTU's efforts to help harness public concern about new mining in the renown Blackfoot River headwaters. While this Annual Report and these stories are about trout conservation, they are also about building relationships and engaging people, which is something else I've been reflecting on as a benefit and driver of this organization.

At Trout Unlimited's Western Rendezvous held in Missoula this April, the conversations that stayed with me longest weren't about fish counts or funding formulas. They were about people — who we're welcoming into MTU, who we're missing, and how we grow a conservation movement that lasts. Engagement is the word that kept coming up, and rightly so. It turns out that engagement isn't just a membership concept — it's what happens when boots hit the bank on a willow planting day, when volunteers wade into a creek to build beaver dam analogs, when a chapter rallies around 8,000 feet of stream habitat for west-slope cutthroat.

The Big Blackfoot Chapter's ongoing work on Nevada Creek, the Magic City Fly Fishers and Joe Brooks chapters joining forces on the Stillwater and Rock Creek, the Madison Gallatin Chapter's creative partnership on Mandeville Creek — these projects are conservation, yes, but they're also how TU grows its people. And perhaps most exciting, this past year saw the first-ever rehabilitation work on both the North and South Forks of the Smith River — a milestone for Montana TU and for one of the state's



most iconic watersheds. Young and old, women and men, experienced anglers and first-timers — stream restoration is one of the most powerful engagement tools we have, and it's why Montana's chapters, MTU and national TU project managers continue to invest in this kind of work. There are more projects than these pages can hold, but every one of them tells the same story: when you give people meaningful work on water they love, they show up.

So when you read the stories in this Trout Line or study the stats in the Annual Report, remember that they reflect the time and effort you and every other TU member and supporter dedicated to the mission. I hope that seeing yourself in these stories and stats, even if you and I aren't mentioned by name, motivates us to help make the coming year exceed the successes of the last. And may your efforts bring you good fishing karma... or at least fewer 'wind knots.'

Lyle Courtnage
Council Chair

SUPPORT OUR WORK



A Winter that Never Arrived by Chris Edgington & Clayton Elliott

This past winter, most precipitation in Montana fell as rain. Like many places that are normally white for much of the winter, the mountains circling Dillon were brown up to 8,000 feet. Gravel roads remained dusty, and our poppies never died back.

While Montana fared much better than the rest of the West, temperatures were still 5-10°F above average. Our watersheds recorded some of the lowest snow totals on record. Yet precipitation totals exceed 100% of the average statewide.

As spring progresses, moderate-to-severe drought conditions dominate southwest Montana. The Upper Missouri Headwater Basin is recording new record lows. These surpass those of the infamous years of 1988, 1995, 2000-2007, and 2021. The long-term peak snow water equivalent (SWE) for the basin is typically 17.5" on April 17. This year, barring a cold, long-duration storm cycle, the peak SWE likely occurred on March 17 at 12.6".

The Ruby River drainage is about half of normal SWE, but precipitation is over 100%. The reservoir should fill, but it won't stay full for long due to the lack of snowmelt that typically occurs in May and June. Clark Canyon and Lima Reservoirs, which feed the Beaverhead River, are only 62% and 68% full, respectively. Third-tier irrigation allotment reductions have been prescribed for Clark Canyon - low instream flows are expected. Winter snowfall in the Gallatin watershed is in the second percentile. Peak discharge for the Jefferson and Big Hole Rivers may have already occurred on March 21st. An astounding 6 weeks ahead of normal. Conditions are in uncharted territory.

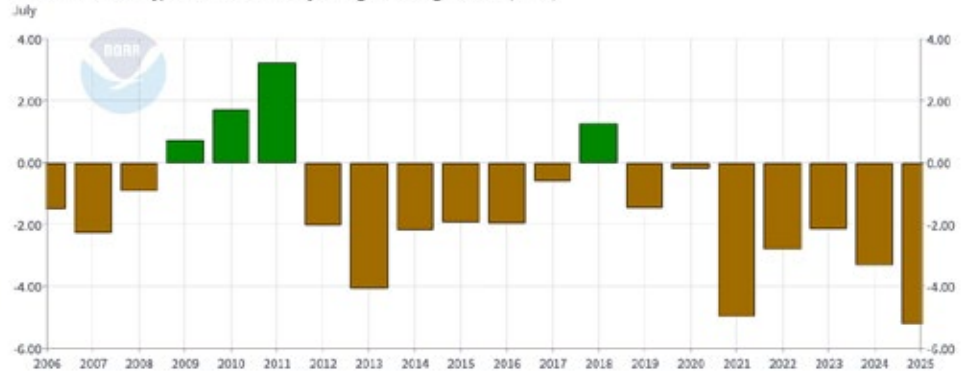
Because we are likely facing an 'every-drop-matters' year, water conservation should be top of mind and in action. Simple steps like reducing lawn watering, fixing leaks, and prioritizing essential water use can help our communities prepare for the months ahead. Cities and towns should implement water reductions. Volunteer drought plans, like those in the Jefferson, Ruby, Big Hole, and Blackfoot, will be put to the test. MTU will support those efforts. Prior to the development of these drought plans, a winter like this would have led to miles of dry riverbeds. We'll be on the ground to document the conditions in the coming months and use every tool at our disposal to maintain instream flows

that sustain our native and wild trout fisheries.

The continued transformation of Montana's water cycle must also inform our policy work - from changing precipitation patterns to timing of runoff and an overall difference in water volumes, they all carry significant consequences for a water law system built on periods of diversion and use, timing, and priority dates for allocation in times of shortage. All the while demands for water use in Montana are increasing and changing. Fortunately, for more than sixty years MTU has been working with diverse stakeholders to pioneer adaptive changes to our state's water policy. We remain optimistic that with smart policy

to promote collaborative solutions that increase the ability of water users to meet new demands with existing water rights, while protecting other water users in the process. This effort builds on decades of advocacy ensuring that instream flow rights are on an equal playing field with other beneficial uses. We've worked to give water users new tools like temporary leases to meet emergency demands, so that tributaries can stay connected to mainstem rivers in late season drought periods. In 2027, we will continue to build on the successes from the last legislative session, passing meaningful reforms that improve water rights transactions, including for instream flow.

Beaverhead County, Montana Palmer Hydrological Drought Index (PHDI)



The Palmer Hydrological Index measures drought severity using temperature, precipitation and soil water holding capacity to model water balance. Figure courtesy of NOAA.

making decisions and investments we can help sustain our coldwater fisheries now and into the future.

First, MTU believes that improving Montana's water storage framework is central to bridging water supply with future demands. We championed efforts last legislative session to invest tens of millions into our existing water storage infrastructure - fixing backlogs in maintenance and increasing storage capacity where we can - as well as investing in new pilot projects that increase water storage to improve stream flows, through built, natural, or underground infrastructure. Now we are working with the state agencies to ensure that those investments actually move the needle in terms of improved coldwater and late season instream flows, and we are looking forward to the next legislative session to advance policies that increase flexibility for water users to add storage to existing water rights.

Speaking of flexibility, we continue

Lastly, we continue to advocate for tools to help those who conserve water usage. Last session we codified protections for water users who reduce irrigation in periods of drought as part of a voluntary drought management plan from abandonment claims. Once again, we will work with any water users interested in modernizing the permitting process and stepping into the modern era of requiring common sense measurement and enforcement of legal water use.

We cannot do this alone. Reach out to your legislator, help educate them on the water challenges facing our community and why our rivers and coldwater fisheries matter to you. Good policy making and tangible change in water policy begins in our communities one cup of coffee at a time.



The Blackfoot River: More Valuable than Gold...Still by David Brooks

At the March 25 meeting of the MT Environmental Quality Council, an interim legislative committee, someone asked how many public comments in opposition to a new gold mine exploration permit it would take for the MT Department of Environmental Quality to reject the permit application. The answer is: no amount. According to laws governing permits, Montanans have no ability to simply say “no.” Once again, we are faced with evaluating all the specific ways another mine in one of the world’s most renowned watersheds might risk destroying it.

The question was in reference to a public comment period on a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzing the Columbia Gold Project, a proposal by Australian-owned Sentinel Metals (doing business as Great Plains Mining, LLC) to drill up to 21 holes along a ridge separating Hogum Creek and Seven-Up-Pete Creek, tributaries of the Blackfoot River, upstream of Lincoln. The intent of the operation is for the upstart company to explore the depth and grade of gold in ore under that ridge. The 21 holes would reach deeper into the earth than the previous 400+ drill holes and ore samples that have already been tested over the last three decades from the private land mining claims that make up the site.

In the past, the amount of gold in this orebody has not warranted full-scale mining by a succession of owners of the existing exploration permit that Sentinel Metals is trying to amend with this EA for two reasons: First, it is low-grade. The quantities of gold in the rock are small and, hence, not easy to profit from. Second, and related to the first reason, to be profitable, lots of ore has to be mined and gold has to be extracted cheaply. The main way of doing the latter is using cyanide to leach gold from rock that has been mined from an open pit operation. Montanans banned cyanide leaching for gold and silver from open pit operations (MCA 82-4-390) through a ballot initiative in 1998 specifically to stop a company that was proposing an open pit gold mine across the river from the current Sentinel Metals site.

The cyanide ban was widely popular and supported by most conservation organizations, including MTU. It was a defining moment in the state’s history



The Blackfoot River near Belmont Creek.

of valuing and protecting our rivers. So it is no wonder that so much attention is being focused on this new proposal to potentially kick-start gold mining in the headwaters of the Blackfoot. The attention is also due to how the company sprung its exploration plan on the public.

Sentinel Metals formed in winter of 2025 with the sole purpose of pursuing exploration in the Blackfoot, yet did no public outreach. The company delivered an aggressive pitch to potential investors in November 2025, including ample mention of a possible open pit operation but did not engage Blackfoot locals, conservation organizations or Montana citizens. It then submitted its amendment to a nearly

30-year old exploration permit (that it acquired through the bankruptcy of the previous owner) to DEQ early in 2026, accompanied, again, by no outreach. The first most people heard about the proposal was when DEQ announced a 15-day public comment period starting in late March, which the agency ultimately extended for an extra week.

Despite the investor pitch, Sentinel Metals now says it has no plans to create an open pit operation nor to use cyanide for extracting gold from an underground mining operation. Even if that is so, the exploration work proposed in the EA poses risks to water, fish and other natural resources.

MTU’s comments to DEQ on the Columbia Gold Project are driven by the value of the Blackfoot River and its many resources, past investment in this watershed, and shortcomings of the EA. The Blackfoot and its tributaries make up one of Montana’s greatest trout waters, home to popular fisheries including native westslope cutthroat trout and ESA-listed bull trout. Our organization, many partners, landowners and the public have invested decades of effort in restoring the Blackfoot fishery, river health and working lands from the impacts of previous mining in the watershed, including \$70M+ in public funds to clean up and perpetually treat acid mine drainage from the Mike Horse Mine that devastated the Blackfoot River

ACTION ALERT



CONCERNED ABOUT MINING PROPOSALS IN THE BLACKFOOT AND BITTERROOT?

ADD YOUR NAME TO OUR ACTION ALERT LIST!

Continued on page 10.
SPRING 2026



FYE 2026 ANNUAL REPORT



HEALTHY RIVERS & WILD TROUT BY THE NUMBERS

5,000+ MEMBERS AND FRIENDS
7 STAFF INCLUDING **2** PROJECT MANAGERS
2 BIG SKY WATERSHED CORPS MEMBERS
13 LOCAL CHAPTERS
12,000+ ONLINE FOLLOWERS

MTU MINI GRANT PROGRAM

6 PROJECTS
\$25,000
6 CHAPTERS
3 HABITAT PROJECTS
3 EDUCATION PROJECTS

NATIVE TROUT

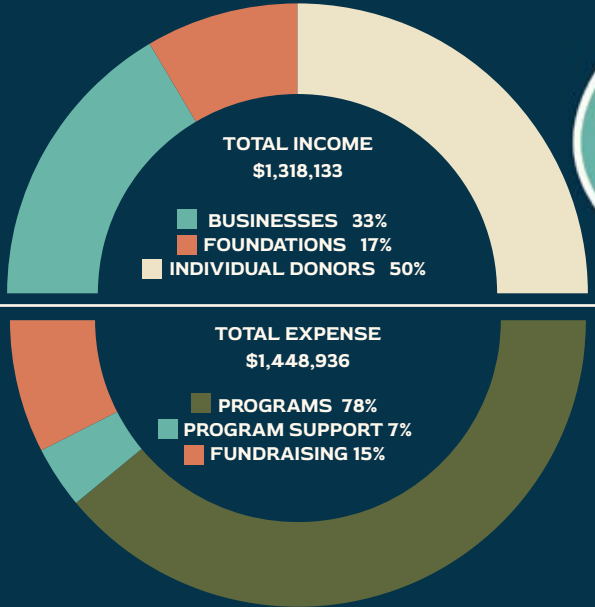
HELPED FWP DEVELOP WCT CONSERVATION STRATEGIES FOR
6 WATERSHEDS IN WESTERN MT

20 YEARS OF ARCTIC GRAYLING RECOVERY IN BIG HOLE

OUTREACH

30+ EVENTS
1000+ IN-PERSON CONTACTS

PROGRAM HEALTH & EFFICIENCY



THANK YOU!!!

Generous donations helped MTU continue to grow in FYE2026.

MTU had a 168% increase in the number of multi-year gifts!

*MTU financial statements are reviewed annually by Boyle, Deveny & Meyer PC, an independent CPA.

YOUTH EDUCATION

20 YOUTH CAMPERS
28 VOLUNTEERS
1:1 STAFF:CAMPER RATIO
150+ KIDS SERVED



1,364 LAKE TROUT
REMOVED TO RECOVER
BULL TROUT IN

SWAN LAKE



WATER POLICY

**CHAMPIONED \$100 MILLION
INVESTMENT FOR EXISTING
WATER STORAGE**

**PROMOTING COLLABORATIVE
SOLUTIONS THAT PRIORITIZE
& INCENTIVISE INSTREAM
FLOW**

**PROTECTING WATER USERS
WHO VOLUNTARILY REDUCE
WITHDRAWLS FROM
ABANDONMENT**

BEARTOOTH PROJECT AREA

STILLWATER RIVER OLD NYE FISHING ACCESS

3000 WILLOWS PLANTED

170 FEET OF LARGE WOOD BANK TREATMENT

3 POST-ASSISTED LOG STRUCTURES INSTALLED

60% DESIGN COMPLETION FOR **3** FLOOD
RESILANCE PROJECTS IN **3** WATERSHEDS

3 WATERSHED GROUP PARTNERS



JEFFERSON WATERSHED

SHAW DAM REMOVAL

Finalized permitting & seeking final funding

BIG HOLE RIVER

Finalized design for Johnson Creek and 60% design
for Alder Creek river reconnection projects

POINDEXTER SLOUGH

Staked over **6,000** willows on **325'** of bank
& restored floodplain connection

HELD 1st ANNUAL

Jefferson Basin Instream Flow Strategy Workshop

Hosted a federal and state delegation tour
highlighting the restoration economy

Appeared on **CBS News' 60 Minutes**



 **DONATE**



CONSERVE. PROTECT. RESTORE.



“What is a crew?
A crew is inescapably,
beautifully, dutifully
linked. Planet Earth,
you are a crew.”

— Christina Koch,
Artemis II Astronaut



Why is Everybody Talking about Beavers, Anyway? by Katie Young

Montana spring is upon us! Familiar indicators abound: Every time a bout of new spring snow melts, the grass underneath is a little bit greener, a few new wildflowers poke out, and river levels rise. Also indicative of the vernal transition is an uptick in critter activity as many hardy creatures exit the hole they crawled into last fall. In Red Lodge, the return of knocked over trash cans in town signals the most recognizable great awakening, that of resident bears. But as river stewards, we should also remember the beaver who has largely been munching on a reserve of sticks and branches from the comfort of a warm lodge for the past four months!

Beavers are top of mind for me as they have unexpectedly moved in at one of my project sites, Jimmy Joe Campground on East Rosebud Creek. Campsite flooding that was originally caused by a newly flowing spring, the result of shifts in groundwater hydrology in the 2022 Yellowstone flood, has been exacerbated by beavers that moved into the site sometime during the '24/'25 winter.

In the past year, this beaver family has constructed around 100 linear feet of dam structures, transforming a free-flowing spring into a series of three small ponds. Unfortunately, these dams have also increased flooding impacts to the south side of the campground. As a result, the project scope has now shifted to include design features that will prevent the beavers from plugging the culvert up, but will allow them to continue to use the site.

As trout people, why should we 'give a dam' about beaver activity or accommodating beavers at a restoration site? At first it might seem easier to simply blow the beaver dams and trap beavers out of the site. While easier, that solu-



Beavers colonizing recently restored stream reaches shows the resilience of riparian communities.

tion is short-sighted. Beavers can play a big role in improving stream health and aquatic habitat. Some of the ecosystem services provided by beaver ponds include:

Increased water storage. In addition to storing surface water in the pools formed by dams, the ponded water also increases groundwater recharge. Some research indicates that groundwater recharge from beaver ponds contributes to maintaining cold, clean base flows in trout streams in low water years.

Excess nutrient/pollutant filtering. As water slows down when it hits a beaver pond, sediment and particulates deposit on the river bottom. As water exits the beaver dam, it is cleaner and clearer. Additionally, as beaver ponds saturate their adjacent floodplains, they encourage the growth of riparian and aquatic plants that help remove excess nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus from rivers.

Habitat complexity. Beaver ponds create the side channels, sloughs, and meanders that add complexity to stream habitats, giving fish more places to hide, rest, or spawn.

Despite the numerous benefits of beaver activity in our watersheds and for trout, they also create a variety of challenges to land managers. Beavers' instinct to build dams is stimulated by the sound of rushing water. The burble of a stream flowing through a culvert sounds to them like a call to action. They dam the culvert, which backs up water and causes damage to the road-

way it passes under.

And so we return to Jimmy Joe Campground, where a very impressive - and equally destructive - dam has been built right along the edge of the campground road. Implementing a project that will strike the balance of maintaining campsite infrastructure while allowing the beaver to do their thing will be achieved in two ways. The first is that a campsite right on the edge of the pond complex that the beavers have created will be relocated out of the floodplain.

The second is the installation of an innovative device on the upstream end of the new culvert that runs under the campground road. The device extends the culvert inlet to the deepest part of the beaver pond and is designed to allow water to flow through the culvert while discouraging dam building at the inlet. The device is known as a pond leveler because it will allow the Custer Gallatin National Forest to keep the beaver pond low enough to prevent road flooding but deep enough to maintain beaver habitat.

This project is in a publicly visible area. So, in addition to giving campers a view of the amazing ecosystem created by a beaver pond, it will also help people see an example of innovative ways to coexist with beavers. Stay tuned for implementation this fall!



SUPPORT OUR WORK



Ask for the original Montana Council of Trout Unlimited Plate when you purchase a new vehicle or renew your registration.

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Hamilton, MT/Redwood City, CA



Restoration and remediation of past mining in the Blackfoot has taken 3 decades and tens of millions of dollars.

Mining, continued from page 10.

not so long ago and not so far from the proposed Columbia Gold Project.

DEQ should require Sentinel Metals to apply for a new exploration permit, rather than allowing the company to amend an exploration permit that is decades old and that Sentinel acquired through the bankruptcy of another company. The EA should provide far more information about reclamation of exploration drill holes. In the EA, Sentinel Metals fails to model runoff from the drill holes/drill pads under a 100-year storm (rain on snow) event to ensure the project minimizes the risk of sediment or drilling chemicals reaching adjacent wetlands or Blackfoot tributaries (Hogum Creek and Seven-Up Pete are within 1,400' of the drill sites), which are home to native westslope cutthroat trout and in bull trout critical habitat. There is no data in the EA about potential pollutants in the ore being sampled, such as heavy metals or sulfide (which can cause perpetual acid mine drainage), even though 400+ samples have already been taken from the area. And the draft EA provides no data on the area's fishery that could be put at risk from any degradation of water quality or quantity and habitat.

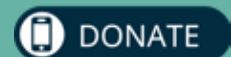
Thank you to everyone who has followed this issue and provided individual public comment. Unfortunately, as Sentinel Metals has told potential investors, Montana mining law has gotten increasingly favorable to full-scale mining and permitting projects of this sort.

That is why we have encouraged and submitted detailed comments about the deficiencies of the current EA and

why we will continue to press DEQ to address those deficiencies before permitting any mining activities in trout country. Too much has been invested in the Blackfoot's recovery from historic mining to do otherwise.



SUPPORT OUR WORK



Your gift helps us to sustain our vital mission:

To conserve, protect, and restore Montana's coldwater fisheries and their watersheds.

CHAPTER NEWS

BITTERROOT CHAPTER

The Chapter is currently celebrating our 50th anniversary with a special commemorative logo by artist Bobbi Dye. We have Yeti mugs, caps, stickers available at BRTU events and online. Grab yours today! Looking forward, we'll be attending the annual Teller Wildlife Refuge Youth Conservation and Education Expo on May 16, continuing our strong tradition of youth engagement. MTU's David Brooks will be our speaker for the final chapter meeting of the season on May 19, where he'll discuss the mining industry's many impacts on Montana's wild trout streams. Lastly, our annual banquet will be held on September 19th in Hamilton so Save the Date on your calendar!

FLATHEAD CHAPTER

FVTU is gearing up for our Flathead Fin Fest spring fundraiser on May 16th at Snappy's Sports Senter. This will be a family-oriented event with lots of fun in support of a great cause. We also recently unveiled a brand-new website thanks to help from Gecko Designs in Missoula. The new page looks great and brings a modern look to our long history supporting native Westslope cutthroat and bull trout conservation.

MAGIC CITY FLY FISHERS

With a new Board and officers, the MCFF chapter has taken steps to heighten our engagement with conservation matters and cultivate a stronger public presence while maintaining our strong youth education programs. Our biggest focus right now is our upcoming fundraising banquet on May 15 to support the restoration projects on the Stillwater River and Rock Creek that MTU Project Manager Katie Young has developed. It's shaping up to be a spectacular evening! We are also planning our annual Kevin Davis Youth Fly Fishing Camp which runs from June 1st-5th at the FWP headquarters at Lake Elmo with a final day field trip up into the Beartooths to fish Wild Bill Lake. For tickets and information on both of these events, go to our brand new website at <http://mcffonline.org>. Our other activities include flytying in the middle schools, helping with Rocky Mountain College's Fly Fishing club, fly-

tying kits at the public library, Rimrock River Sisters women's group, mini-grants with Matt Wilhelm's youth education and Katie Young's Soda Butte Creek project and giving input to the Natural Resource Damage Program's Yellowstone River Project. Our chapter meetings are held monthly (with a summer break June-August) at Angry Hank's brewery and are open to all.

MISSOURI RIVER FLY FISHERS

The Chapter recently held a successful Pint Night at Mighty Mo Brewing to raise funding and awareness for adding AED's to FAS locations on the Missouri River. AEDs are a great way to improve survivability in case of medical emergency while fishing or recreating along the river. Thanks to Mighty Mo for hosting us and contributing \$1 to MRF for each pint sold. And thanks to FOAM for donating funds for our first AED, which will be installed at Craig. Details coming soon.

WESTSLOPE CHAPTER

The Chapter is excited to share that Missoula Fly Gals is being revived! This program connects women anglers in the Missoula community through fishing events, education, and time on the water. MFG will be hosting monthly Wade In Wednesdays for female anglers this summer, with our next outing scheduled for Rock Creek on June 3, with more scheduled. If you want to stay in the loop on upcoming gatherings, trips, and opportunities, find us on social media at @MissoulaFlyGals.



Missoula Fly Gals enjoying a Wade In Wednesday event.



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TROUT LINE SPRING 2026

UPCOMING EVENTS www.montanatu.org

- 5/15/26 MRFF Chapter Banquet**
GREAT FALLS, MT
- 5/16/26 Flathead Valley Chapter Fundraiser**
KALISPELL, MT
- 5/21/26 Bitterroot TU Chapter Meeting**
HAMILTON, MT
- 5/30/26 MTU State Council Meeting**
KALISPELL, MT
- 6/17/26 Wadsworth Pond Fundraiser**
GREAT FALLS, MT
- 7/05/26 MTU Conservation Youth Camp**
PHILLIPSBURG, MT
- 9/26/26 Bitterroot TU Banquet**
HAMILTON, MT
- 9/26/26 MTU State Council Meeting**
BILLINGS, MT

WANT 5,000+ MTU SUPPORTERS TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR EVENT?

Please contact the Missoula office at 406-543-0054 or bill@montanatu.org to get the word out through Montana TU.



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